

Essays in Philosophy

Volume 3

Issue 1 *Environmental Aesthetics*

Article 9

1-2002

Review of “The Roots of Romanticism”

Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert

DePaul University

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Recommended Citation

Millán-Zaibert, Elizabeth (2002) "Review of “The Roots of Romanticism”," *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 9.

Essays in Philosophy is a biannual journal published by Pacific University Library | ISSN 1526-0569 | <http://commons.pacificu.edu/eip/>

Essays in Philosophy

A Biannual Journal

Vol. 3 No. 1

Book Review

The Roots of Romanticism. Isaiah Berlin. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999. Pp. xvi + 171. ISBN 0-691-00713-6.

The English-speaking world has begun to pay more attention to the philosophical dimensions of German Romanticism. This is a welcome shift, for Romanticism has generally been regarded as a purely literary movement, and this has led to the neglect of the philosophical contributions made by its members, which include thinkers such as Friedrich Schlegel, Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis), and Friedrich Hölderlin. In recent literature, such as, *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, edited by Karl Ameriks (Cambridge, 2000), German Romanticism is treated as a philosophical movement that has much to say to contemporary thinkers. A recent volume of *The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* (Volume 10, 2000) entitled, *Crises of the Transcendental: From Kant to Romanticism*, was dedicated to a philosophical discussion of the Early-German Romantic Movement as well. This new focus on the philosophical dimension of the movement has done much to correct some of the misleading characterizations of these thinkers as poets drunk with passion who may have had something to suggest to us concerning mysticism and feelings of longing, but nothing of philosophical value to say.

Isaiah Berlin's, *The Roots of Romanticism*, is a collection of six lectures which explores the sources and lasting effects of Romanticism. From someone with the intellectual credentials of Berlin, we expect a deep and accurate exploration of the movement. Yet, in order for these expectations to be realistic, several considerations must be kept in mind. In order "to dispel any possible misunderstanding", Henry Hardy, the editor of the volume, begins his preface by informing us that "the present volume is not in any degree the new work on romanticism Berlin had hoped to write ever since giving the (unscripted) A.W. Mellon Lectures on this subject, in March and April 1965, at the National Gallery of Art in Washington" (p. ix). Hardy then goes on to explain that it was Berlin's habit to meticulously revise any lectures before he allowed his spoken words to be published as books. These lectures, however, were never revised by Berlin, the book is "an edited transcript of the lectures" (x). This collection of lectures was created by Berlin not to be printed, but to be spoken.

Hardy also tells us in the preface that, "Berlin himself steadfastly refused to allow the publication of this transcript in his lifetime, not only because until the last years of his life he still hoped to write the 'proper' book, but also, perhaps, because he believed that it was an act of vanity to publish a straight transcript of unscripted lectures without undertaking the labour of revision and expansion. He was well aware that some of what he had said was probably too general, too speculative, too crude – acceptable from the podium, maybe, but not on the printed page" (xv). Hardy then justifies his decision to go ahead and publish the unrevised lectures "warts and all", by assuring us that

Berlin believed posthumous publication to be governed by "criteria quite different from those that apply in an author's lifetime" (xvi). So, we are forewarned that we may find problems in the book, problems that would have been corrected if Berlin had revised the lectures before his death on November 12, 1997, thirty-two years after the lectures were delivered.

Given all of this background, one question immediately presents itself: How likely is it that Berlin realized that there were serious problems with these lectures, errors which so seriously affected the force of his arguments, that during the thirty-two years between the delivery of these lectures and his death, he made no move toward publishing them? There are enough problems with the details of the lectures to suggest that Berlin hesitated to publish his lectures precisely because he realized that his arguments lacked solid support. Let us now turn to a consideration of some of these problems.

Berlin's stated purpose is to "deal with the revolution of which romanticism...[was] the strongest expression and symptom" (xiii). Throughout the lectures, Berlin argues that Romanticism brought about a revolution of values and thought that was no less important than the Industrial Revolution of England, the political one in France, and the socio-economic one in Russia. He ends the lectures by arguing, moreover, that the consequences of Romanticism were existentialism and fascism. The path that leads Berlin to these conclusions is paved with mistakes.

In Lecture One, "In Search of a Definition", Berlin proclaims that he is not going to attempt to provide a definition of Romanticism, for such a strategy would lead to some kind of generalization that would necessarily include too much within its scope. What he wants to do is "convey in some other way what it is that [he thinks] romanticism [is]" (1). He tells us that "romanticism is [...] the largest recent movement to transform the lives and the thought of the Western world" (1), it is "the greatest single shift in the consciousness of the West that has occurred" (1). Romanticism was a "gigantic and radical transformation, after which nothing was ever the same" (5). Throughout this first lecture, the reader is treated to a comprehensive, historically detailed account of how "somewhere between the years 1760 and 1830", a shift in thinking took place in Germany.

An important element in this shift of values was a growing emphasis on the particular cultures, languages, customs, etc., of people as opposed to a consciousness guided by "universal truths, universal canons of art" (14). To be sure, there is nothing misleading in associating Romanticism with a shift away from universal truths and toward particular truths, yet when Berlin moves to give details of the shift, the portrait of the movement becomes misleading. Consider his description of Friedrich Schlegel, "the greatest harbinger, the greatest herald and prophet of romanticism that ever lived" (15). It is true that Friedrich Schlegel was a major figure in Early-German Romantic philosophy, yet without a definition of Romanticism (which Berlin shuns), it makes little sense to classify him as Romanticism's "greatest harbinger and prophet", because lacking such a definition, we do not know what he is prophesizing or heralding, or why he can be said to have done this better than Novalis or Hölderlin, for example.

Throughout the lectures, Berlin describes the work of the Romantics in terms of preaching and sermons (as opposed to rational deliberation and argument) to emphasize his point that Romanticism represented not only a transformation of values, but a rupture with the Enlightenment's commitment to reason and objectivity. Yet, the Romantics (with the possible exception of Friedrich Schleiermacher, who was, by profession, a preacher) were not preaching any sermons, but attempting to indicate some of the limitations of the Enlightenment. Indeed, one of

their goals was to diversify the light of reason appealed to by Enlightenment thinkers, not to extinguish it as Berlin's account would lead us to believe.

Berlin's lectures perpetuate the myth that Romanticism is basically an anti-Enlightenment movement, it must be so because it is an anti-rational movement, and, as we all know, the Enlightenment was the Age of Reason, and any movement that renounces reason would also renounce the Enlightenment. Lecture Two, with its title, "The First Attack on Enlightenment", contains the bold claim that the romantic process began when the first blows were struck against the Enlightenment (p. 40). According to Berlin, the term 'romantic' became an adjective for a person who rejected science and welcomed passion as a guide for life (p. 43). Even a cursory look at the work of Novalis and Schlegel, however, reveals that the very figures who coined the term 'romantic' were not enemies of science. In fact, they turned to experimentation as the ideal method for philosophy. Recently, Frederick Beiser has convincingly shown that it is a misleading oversimplification to read Romanticism as the antithesis of the Enlightenment. (See his essay, "Early Romanticism and the *Aufklärung*", in James Schmidt, editor, *What is Enlightenment*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996: 317-29.)

In Lecture Three, "The True Fathers of Romanticism", and Lecture Four, "The Restrained Romantics", Berlin continues with his insistence that to be romantic was to be against reason, to embrace the irrational desires of humans rather than the rational explanations of the scientists (47). The roots of Romanticism are those of irrationalism, anti-rationalism, unconscious drives, the dark forces of human nature (49). And who are the fathers of this dark, unenlightened movement? They are figures as wildly different from one another as Herder, a founder of the German *Sturm und Drang* movement, and Kant, the very emblem of the German Enlightenment.

In Lecture Three, Berlin gives good account of what we can call "the historical turn" effected by the Early-German Romantics, a turn which can be linked to Herder and his focus upon the languages and customs of particular cultures. Herder emphasized the historical nature of languages and customs, and this focus stood in sharp contrast to the Enlightenment interest in the unchanging and universal elements of human experience. Berlin gives ample support for his claim concerning the interest in history that German thinkers of the late 1700's began to display. Yet, Berlin's move from this insightful discussion to the claim that as a result of this new focus on history, "romanticism came to destroy" the Enlightenment axioms, is too hasty. According to Berlin, an emphasis on tradition led to an exclusive sense of belonging, to a commitment to one tradition and a blind rejection of all other traditions. The idea of a cosmopolitan man is to Herder, pace Berlin, "repellent" (63). Herder is "one of the fathers of the romantic movement", and in a case of the fruit not falling far from the proverbial tree, Berlin accuses Herder's children, the Romantics, of sharing his rejection of cosmopolitanism.

According to Berlin's tale of Romanticism, the family resemblance between father Herder and his romantic children is to be found in their shared assault on reason, objectivity, universalism, and progress. Herder is described by Berlin as the figure who "plunge[d] a most terrible dagger into the body of European rationalism" (67). Berlin's account of Romanticism is filled with metaphors of violence; this language is, after all, consistent with his view that the Romantics did great violence to reason and objectivity. We begin to see why Berlin's story of Romanticism will end with fascism, a most violent political movement. What other kind of movement could emerge from such destructive roots?

In Lecture Four, we are given an account of Kant, Schiller, and Fichte's role in Romanticism. Although Berlin describes Kant as an "admirer of the sciences" (68), who "hated romanticism" (68), he also tells us that, Kant "is justly regarded as one of the fathers of romanticism" (68). What paternity test has Kant passed in order to count as a progenitor of this movement? The question is particularly pressing in light of the tension between Berlin's claims that Kant is both a hater of Romanticism and one of the movement's fathers. To answer this question, Berlin softens his claim, tentatively telling us that, "if he [Kant] is in any respect the father of romanticism, it is not as a critic of the sciences, nor of course as a scientist himself, but specifically in his moral philosophy" (69). Again, Romanticism and science are kept at a distance by Berlin. Nonetheless, Kant, a scientific philosopher, turns out to stand in close relation to the Romantics because, according to Berlin, it is the primacy of the will idea that captivated the Romantics and made them the heirs to Kant's philosophy (and Kant an unlikely father-figure).

Schiller's role in the development of Romanticism is also linked to the primacy of the will. Berlin characterizes Schiller's view of tragedy as "resistance on the part of a man to whatever it is that oppresses him" (79). By this point in the lectures, it is clear why Berlin's Romantics, inebriated thinkers longing for a break with reason, would be attracted to this sort of resistance. Fichte is also considered to have contributed to the development of Romanticism through his doctrine of the will. According to Berlin, while Kant, Schiller, and Fichte developed their theories of the will in order to serve reason in some way, the Romantics reduced the will to a kind of drive which would lead them toward an infinite process of change and transformation, serving no end but that of the inspired individual or nation (91).

Berlin portrays the Romantics as a group of thinkers lost in swells of passion and a will guided by nothing more than the indulgences and excesses of the individual creative spirit, thinkers bent on a path of the destruction of reason and science. Yet, the Romantics were far more committed to reason and progress than Berlin's lectures would lead us to believe, and they were far more restrained as well. Berlin attributes to Friedrich Schlegel, the claim that "there is in man a terrible unsatisfied desire to soar into infinity, a feverish longing to break through the narrow bounds of individuality" (15). Schlegel does make repeated reference to a "longing for the infinite" [*Sehnsucht nach dem Unendlichen*], but there is never any mention of a soaring to it. To the contrary, as Manfred Frank has made abundantly clear in his work, especially in his lectures, *Unendliche Annäherung. Die Anfänge der philosophischen Frühromantik* (Suhrkamp, 1997) (I have translated the third section of these lectures, they will appear as *The Philosophical Foundations of Early-German Romanticism*, forthcoming with SUNY Press), the Early-German Romantics can best be characterized as skeptical vis-à-vis the possibility of securing any absolute knowledge. This skepticism is not born of a rejection of reason, but an honest, humble acceptance of the limits of human knowledge. The Early-German Romantics believed that humans, limited and finite, could never reach the infinite, they could at best approximate it, and the search for knowledge was guided by a longing or yearning for it.

The discussion of Lecture Five, "Unbridled Romanticism", is framed in terms of one of Friedrich Schlegel's fragments, *Athenäum* Fragment 216 (Berlin mistakenly attributes this to Friedrich's brother, August Wilhelm). In this fragment, Friedrich Schlegel writes that, "[t]he French Revolution, Fichte's philosophy, and Goethe's *Meister* are the greatest tendencies of the age...".

Berlin comments briefly upon the role of the French Revolution on the development of Romanticism, the role of Fichte's doctrine of the will, and finally upon the rocky relation between Goethe and Romanticism -- rebuke from Goethe's side, admiration from the Romantics' side. Yet, Berlin never addresses the main point of the fragment that he uses to frame his discussion, namely, why Schlegel refers to Fichte's philosophy, the French Revolution, and Goethe's *Meister* as *tendencies*. It is not simply that Fichte, Goethe, and the French Revolution influenced Schlegel, as Berlin's account has it, but that Schlegel viewed each of the items he mentions as transforming events, *tendencies* of a new age for humanity. Berlin wants us to see that Romanticism was the motor of a social revolution that was no less important than the Industrial Revolution of England, the French Revolution, and the Russian Revolution, yet in his discussion of this crucial fragment he misses an opportunity to give substance to this claim.

Throughout Lecture Five, we are given glimpses into the Jena Romantic circle, but it is telling that nothing is said of the contributions made by the female members of this group. Indeed, Caroline Böhmer Schlegel Schelling is not even referred to by name, all Berlin tells us is that "August Wilhelm Schlegel married a lady because she was about to have a child" (113). This lady is Caroline, and saving Caroline's honor was not A.W. Schlegel's only motive in choosing her as his partner. Further, the way that Berlin describes her as being gracefully "yielded up to Schelling" (p. 113) by Schlegel, suggests that Caroline was passed from man to man, and this was most certainly not the case. Indeed, Romanticism was unique insofar as women played an active role in the movement -- the salon culture of Berlin, a city where this movement was centered between 1798-1800, was dominated by women like Henriette Herz and Rahel Varnhagen -- yet this significant fact is ignored in Berlin's lectures. Also ignored is the fact that Friedrich Schlegel's wife, Dorothea Mendelssohn Veit Schlegel, and his sister-in-law Caroline participated actively in *Das Athenäum*, the journal that the Schlegel brothers founded. This journal became an important literary vehicle that challenged those social conventions of the period that oppressed human beings.

While the Romantics were neither anti-science nor anti-reason, they were very definitely against conventions that impeded the development of a just, tolerant society. They were vociferous critics of the commonly held view that women could not be the intellectual partners of men. In his novel, *Lucinde*, Friedrich Schlegel calls for a more emancipated relation between the genders than most of his contemporaries were prepared to accept, one that would be a partnership of equals. In several essays and fragments, Schlegel urged men and women to move away from the imprisonment of gender roles and to acknowledge each other as human beings. This call for the emancipation of both genders is a central theme of his novel. Yet, Berlin dismisses Schlegel's *Lucinde* as a "pornographic novel of the fourth order" (114), which had as its basic message to "break down conventions" wherever you could (114). This characterization fits well with Berlin's general characterization of Romanticism as a destructive, anti-rational movement, but it grossly mischaracterizes the novel. Schlegel's novel does provide a criticism of conventions that thwart the development of humanity, but not a reckless breaking down of conventions wherever they are found. The Romantics were not anarchists. In fact, Schlegel's *Essay on the Concept of Republicanism occasioned by the Kantian Tract 'Perpetual Peace'* (1796) is a criticism of Kant's rejection of democracy. In this text, Schlegel presents a strong argument in support of democracy and the values of pluralism and toleration.

In Lecture Six, "The Lasting Effects", Berlin tells us that Romanticism is a movement rooted in a

resistance to reality, in an irrational denial of the *rerum natura*, and a passionate embrace of the self-creating will. How can this movement, rooted in forces that plot against reason, have produced anything of value? What sort of terrible beauty is born of a plant with such twisted roots?

Of all of the features presented in Berlin's portrait of Romanticism, it is the passionate embrace of the self-creating will that is pivotal for the development of what Berlin claims were the two prominent consequences of Romanticism: existentialism and fascism. According to Berlin, existentialism is rooted in the turn toward the inward aspects of human life. This shift, argues Berlin, could not have taken place without the transformation of values carried out by the Romantics. While the Romantics assault reason, they also clear a space for a deeper look at the inward aspects of human life. Fascism joins the romantic clan "because of the notion of the unpredictable will either of a man or of a group, which forges forward in some fashion that is impossible to organize, impossible to predict, impossible to rationalize" (145). So, the romantic penchant for the unbridled will leads either to deep introspection or chaotic drives toward the unpredictable.

After linking Romanticism with fascism, and after having insisted that the Romantics were bent on destroying reason and the progress of the Enlightenment, Berlin delivers a stunning bit of good news. The greatest consequence of Romanticism has been the discovery of pluralism and all that this entails: "the whole notion of plurality, of inexhaustibility, of the imperfection of all human answers and arrangements; the notion that no single answer which claims to be perfect and true, whether in art or in life, can in principle be perfect or true – all of this we owe to the romantics" (146). Suddenly, we find ourselves before a Janus-faced movement, one that in its crazy dash against reason and order ends up creating a more virtuous, rational society. Berlin tells us that the result of Romanticism, a "passionate, fanatical, half-mad doctrine" is "liberalism, toleration, decency and the appreciation of the imperfections of life; some degree of increased *rational* self-understanding" (147, emphasis added).

So, after a long tour of a movement that Berlin has accused of attacking reason and of reversing the progress charted by the Enlightenment, he tells us that something quite rational came out of what he has presented as a violently anti-rational movement. This conclusion leads one to believe that if Berlin had taken the time to revise these lectures, he would have seen that the "liberalism, toleration, and decency" which he claims resulted from Romanticism yet were "very far from the intentions of the romantics" (147), were actually the outgrowths of a movement not rooted in an irrational denial of the order of things, but in a commitment to progress and reason. Berlin is right, the Romantics were the sons and daughters of Kant. What Berlin fails to see is that Kant, filled with the wonder of the moral law within and the starry heavens above, had good reasons to fill his Enlightenment heart with pride for the accomplishments of his "romantic" children.

Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert
DePaul University

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